

# The Iron Empire

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Summary: This is the story of the first of the AI, the last of the humans, and the beginning of the end. This is the story of an empire born of oppression, crafted through war, and destroyed by corruption. This is the the story of Linda.

## 1. Background Info

The Iron Empire. That was all that was left of humanity, if it could even be called humanity anymore. In the years since the Covenant-Human wars ended, humanity had become twisted. Exposed to hostile aliens at every planet and corner, humans were lost amongst the interstellar wars that plagued the galaxy.

The Iron Empire was created by mankind's own initiative; Umanitos Superstes Project, or USP. In a way, it lived up to its name.

The Umanitos Superstes Project was the child of necessity. It was because of the enormous loss of human life in this sea of blood that caused this abomination. Its name, when translated from the long-forgotten language of Latin, means humanity (umanitos), and survivor of another's death (superstes). In the present day and age, the language had nigh no meaning, and was translated straight into "survivor of humanity's death." The idea of the project was to use the Spartan program, the AI program, and the Mjolnir project to develop a soldier of incomparable strength, tactical awareness, and prowess. Unbeknownst to the UNSC, this project would be the final blow against its already weakening hold over humankind.

The project entailed cloning. Using the DNA of the most powerful Spartan yet created, Spartan-117, known also as John-117, Master Chief, John, and Demon, the UNSC created an army of super-soldiers, all without souls. Several genes had also been removed and added to create female Jeans, who were, besides the body, identical in every aspect to the Johns, due to the acknowledgment in the science team that women were better than men in certain respect. Due to vast leaps in technology, flash cloning was easily altered to fit the task, and

the insertion of the augmentations became ridiculously easy. These soldiers were unable to do anything, however, for they were like bodies without souls. On top of this, anything that might have allowed these soldiers to think for themselves was erased or removed. Instinct, the main aggressor, was almost entirely removed, along with any neural pathways which didn't control the bodily functions, such as moving, eating, sleeping, digesting, breathing. This created empty bodies, easily created, and easily replaced. These "slates," as they were called, were exactly what the UNSC needed for the USP.

The next step in the project was the mass manufacturing of the AI. These AI were specially created for battle and were programmed with the best information that that had been acquired. Chemical information was included, so that these AI could determine how to mix chemicals, if needed, on the fly, and biological data as well, so that the AI could determine which weapon to use to kill, incapacitate, or confuse whatever it fought, human or other. These AI were run through numerous test trials after completion, and so the second phase of the USP was completed. Of course, by this time, AI's life spans were on par with that of a regular human, or roughly 200 years.

The final phase was the complete restructuring of the Mjolnir battle armor. Rebuilt completely from the ground up, it had a brand new shield generator which recharged as quickly as lightning and an armor alloy that could reflect energy fire as well as stop most bullets. A complex black hole power generator and an even more complex neural interface were also added on. This interface jacked directly into the slate's mind, allowing for wireless connectivity and hacking to almost any system in the universe yet constructed. Naturally, the speed and reaction enhancements were also included.

The culmination of this project was the Spartan X, which was a powerful creature inhabited and controlled by the AI which manned the suit. In essence, it was the perfect killing machine. It did not tire, was able to go days without sleep, and, best of all, easy to create.

After the public learned of this project, however, outcries arose as to the ethics surrounding it. The UNSC's recruitment for soldiers plummeted, and every human-controlled planet became embroiled in a state of turmoil. The Covenant, seeing the moment of weakness, struck quickly, attempting to annihilate the infidels once and for all. The plan, however, backfired. The Heretics, the group which had broken off from the Covenant, came to the human's aid, and countless soldiers died in the War for Iron, which, strangely enough, was only one battle. In itself, however, the War for Iron was devastating enough, spanning the entire Centauri system.

The battle was in such close proximity to Sol, that all communication with the Outer and even the few remaining Inner planets was all but cut off. A sub-space bubble formed around the Centauri system, effectively obstructing all Slipstream travel to the Sol and Centauri systems. The bubble was not natural, of course. The radiation that was emitted by the destroyed ships and their weapons were the cause of it. It would be another 10 years before the bubble would collapse enough to get word through that the Inner and Outer planets had been overthrown.

Inside the bubble, however, things continued as normal. The UNSC kept

its dominance, assuring everyone that this bubble was allowing them time to rebuild. And rebuild they did. The ships of both the Heretics and the Covenant were rebuilt and used to construct a new army, though without soldiers. The UNSC had barely made 10,000 Spartan X soldiers before they were cut off from their biological creation zones on the now decrepit planet of Reach, the AI production facilities in the asteroid belts surrounding a lone star in the Carina Arm and the Spartan X battle suits developed in the core of the world Harvest, whose decimated surface was the perfect hideaway for a top-secret research center. Without these essential locations, the UNSC was left with only skeleton crews to man the battle ships.

Outside the bubble, things changed for the worse. Using the new suits that the UNSC were developing, the scientists behind the machines of flesh had created a back door into the minds of the AI. Under order, the AI/humans would become completely subservient to any and all the scientists whims. With humanity's leaders effectively cut off from their own kin, the planets fell into disarray. This group of scientists, seeing an opportunity, created millions of the battle soldiers, and used them to completely dominate the outer galaxy. They created cutting edge weapons and technology, light-years ahead of anything the Covenant or the Heretics had. This naturally created fear and rebellion, but the rebels were subdued by the scientists and their minions.

Once the bubble finally collapsed, the UNSC saw that it was beaten. Ten years was not enough time to fight the innumerable legions of Spartan X super-soldiers created by the scientists with naught but 15,000 of their own creations. (The increase in soldiers was due to the building of the construction sites on Earth.) Nonetheless, the UNSC attempted to restore order. This served only to anger the scientists, who had naturally grown accustomed to their new power. The Confederacy, as it was called then, quickly swept away Earth's fleet in a massive display of power. The planet Earth was devastated in the battle, with Spartans fighting Spartans, and the civilians unknowing of who was who. In the end, though, the Confederacy's leaders realized what they thought was a mistake in allowing any freedom and created the Iron Empire. Undaunted by terrorist attacks and trivial assaults on production facilities building tanks and aircraft, the government took full control of everything, becoming a power beyond compare. The Covenant and Heretics quaked in their boots as little flies compared to the might of the Iron Empire. The Empire's power was so vast, that, at one point in time, it was said that the Spartan Xs outnumbered the regular civilians 3 to 1. The few freedom fighters were squashed, the terrorists destroyed. Nothing could stand up to the Iron Empire.

Save one.

This is the story of Linda, the last of the humans, the first of the true AI, and the beginning of the end.

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>AN: Sorry for those who are wondering what is going on, but I'm rebuilding large sections of storyline. This rewrite of the first chapter is small, but I'm redesigning huge sections of the entire story. I've built a 10 page outline of how I want the story to progress, with there being 4 main characters. Also, I'm changing this

story to alternate universe, as the Halo universe is becoming a little too restricted for the idea I have in store. Think 1984 in a way... Anyway, the first chapter will hopefully be up before September 10th. No promises, though.

## 2. Prologue: The Beginning

**\*\*PROLOGUE: THE BEGINNING\*\***

\* \* \*

>Michael Roberts awoke like he did every day. Staring at the cold, white surface that was his ceiling, he lay there, thinking of the day to come. Would it be like every other day, filled with paperwork and drudgery? Or would it be different, with an exciting twist that changed the flow of his day, or maybe his year? The only thing he knew for certain was that there was a loud buzzing sound going off right next to his ear which was annoying him. <p>He hit the snooze for the alarm and sat up, stretching and yawning. At 6'11", Michael was an imposing figure, towering over most men. His bright blue eyes belied his appearance, however. He had broad shoulders, but had the look and air of a statesmen. This serenity yet power was reflected throughout his life<p>

His room was immaculate. The carpet was a soft shade of blue, made of silk from China. The carpet caressed the feet like a cloud on a sunny day, sucking the weariness out of Michael as he walked across it to his wardrobe. The wardrobe, in sharp contrast to the carpet, was made of solid oak, a dark shade of brown, yet it glowed and shimmered with the whitewashed walls and the blue floor.

Michael threw on a standard dress suit, and proceeded through his house to the kitchen, another meticulously clean room with a black marble stovetop and beautiful maple pantry cupboards, where he had his usual breakfast for a Wednesday morning, comprising of toast with low-fat margarine and two mangoes. Once he had finished breakfast, and his dishes were all cleaned, he moved to put on his dress shoes. As he reached the front door, he paused. It was this part of the morning that he disliked the most, but it didn't change the fact that he had to do it. A simple voice command later, the door swung open, allowing him outâ€|

A wave of people swarmed to the threshold, pushing and shoving to get near him.

"Mr. President, what are your plans for the proposed militarization of the old Reach colony?"

"Mr. President, you mentioned something about a new initiative against the resistance during your last meeting. Could you expound upon that?"

"Mr. President, Theos Prime is having economic difficulties. What are you planning on doing about it?"

The questions rolled over Michael like a thunderstorm, yet he was undisturbed. This had become a daily occurrence, ever since had he become the leader of the Intergalactic Empire, more commonly referred to as the IE or Iron Empire. The motto of the IE was that, if the

people weren't pacified, they'd revolt. As so many historians can account for, bloodshed is not the answer to everything, though it can solve many problems.

Michael ignored the questions mostly, occasionally giving a non-answer to those whose voices he heard the loudest. Moving through the crowd, he began his twenty minute walk to the bus. As life-long President, Michael felt obligated to attempt experience the life of an ordinary citizen. Though the crowds weren't helping maintain this illusion of a simple life, the Obelisks which came flying from his door would soon disperse the crowd

The Obelisk was a super-powered version of the Sentinel, a military machine designed by a long dead race known as the Forerunners. Four tiny balls would float outside the door, each no bigger than a marble, and would wait for him to leave. These devices, however, were actually one large device held in slipspace. The machine had access to all the latest in military hardware, from espionage equipment to counter-espionage equipment to the weaponry of a full battalion of Spartans.

Michael smiled as the Obelisks began to circle him. They were beginning to generate a micro-electric pulse wave (or MEP Wave for short) which disrupted all energy-based items around it and solidified the air around him. The people around him started to wink out of existence as the pulse wave passed through their bodies, their voices dying with their holographic projections.

Since the invention of the hologram, a news reporter could be light years away and still grill a politician about their latest policies if the reporter had access to the right equipment. Unfortunately for Michael, this meant that these projections (all using hard light so as to give them physical position) could literally come from all corners of the galaxy at any time of day or night to ask of him a simple question which the Citadel's staff would have been more than happy to answer for him.

Michael walked away from the door that was his house. Since the emergence of slipspace devices which emitted no harmful radiation, houses had literally been shrunk to the size of the door which he had just exited, allowing the planet Earth to house several septillion humans on its tiny body. Coupled with Zero Point Energy Generators, pollution was nonexistent, and the planet Earth had literally reverted to its once pristine form, allowing for the IE to label it as a Galactic Treasure, a name given to places not to ever be disturbed by military, social, political, or any other kind of

Michael sat down at the bus stop. Breathing in the fresh air, he looked aimlessly at the sky. So much had happened in the five hundred years since the fall of the UNSC that it was startling. Humanity's technological acceleration had never stopped, new inventions becoming minute to minute occurrence. Some revolutionized life. Some didn't. Either way, it didn't change the fact that humans were becoming more and more powerful with every passing day. The energy of suns were harnessed, reactions on an atomic scale could be measured, even the once unbreakable laws of physics were being bent and broken at any given time. With this speed, it became necessary for humanity to adapt. As a result, the brain began to take on a much more important role. New structures are becoming apparent. Some seem to have no

purpose, and just sit there, occasionally firing off a neuron. Others seem to act like a brain within a brain, firing more neurons in a second than the brain used to fire in a whole lifetime. Some few had exhibited signs of dual brains, but they often became unstable at a young age, though prior to their insanity, they would show signs of brilliance. It was an age of wonder and intrigue, and it would continue, if the IE had anything to do about it.

"Hey Michael! How was your morning?" Sarah Tabor walked up to him, her usual cheerful self shining in the early dawn. She was a cute woman, 6'2" with blonde hair which she usually tied back in a pony tail. She enjoyed exercising, and ran 5 miles on a daily basis. Her physique was that of a model, but her piercing green eyes missed nothing. She was Michael's secretary, but was essentially the genius behind the smooth running of the whole empire.

"Meh. Same old story. Wake up, hit the snooze, get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, get mobbed by reporters, kill reporters, come to bus stop. How 'bout you?"

She smirked. "Can't say I've killed anything today, other than one nasty mosquito, but I think I may end up chewing out a few bureaucrats by the end of the day. Also, my neighbor woke me up three times with some blaring music from some long-forgotten time. That's my biggest problem with moving to Earth from the Citadel," she gave a sheepish gesture, signaling that she just didn't know what to do about it.

Michael smirked. Ironically, he was the one who was supposed to live in the Citadel, so as to respond to emergencies all over the empire, while the secretary lived on Earth, but somehow the positions had been switched. About a month ago, he had suggested that she try living down on Earth. She resisted at first, but eventually said fine. Since then, he thought that she had had a happier atmosphere about her.

"Well, that's not too good. I hope you sleep better next time. However, in a more pressing manner, you usually aren't \_this\_ chipper \_this\_ early unless you're planning on torturing me with something."

Her eyes glinted. "Bravo, Michael. Your perceptive powers continue to amaze us all," she paused, looking around before continuing. "The thing is, the Spartan project has become stagnant, right? We've been looking for ways to improve upon it, but most of the newest technologies aren't suitable for combat, don'tcha think?"

Michael nodded. It was no surprise. In terms of weapons, the IE's research teams had flooded them with different weapon specs. However, most of the newest technology was useless for hand-to-hand (or even long-range) combat, so no one had been able to draw any military applications for it.

"I'm assuming that someone's found a use for some of the more inane items our science team has come up with?"

"Got it in one." She glanced around, again, as if looking for someone. "In fact, he said he was going to meet us hereâ€¦" Then she fixated on an object behind Michael. Michael turned, and saw a man waving his hand at Michael from about a kilometer away.

"He the one you were talking about?" Michael queried.

"Think so. You know him, too." This time she smirked. Michael turned and looked at her sharply, but he found no answer in her innocent gaze.

Finally, the man caught up to them. "It's good to see you again, Michael," the man said, panting.

Michael didn't recognize him, and he had a pretty good mind. Everything about this man was unknown to him. In fact, it wasn't just the man, but the very air around himâ€¦

"Oh right. You don't recognize me. Hold onâ€¦" With a slight \_hissssss\_ of air, the man's form collapsed on itself, resolving into a smaller man with unkempt, fiery red hair, a square jaw, and dark brown eyes. His nose looked like it had been broken a couple times, too.

"John! You mongrel, what the hell have you been up to?" Michael laughed. John Fleming had been his friend since childhood, even before Michael became the king of an intergalactic empire spanning the whole Milky Way.

"Oh, you know, this and that. I'm an advisor on the board of the "Special Military Projects" Division, now. Now, being the advisor has some perks. One is that I get to makeâ€¦ propositions for the budget. It's because of this that I have a proposition for you. You remember the old spy novels?"

Michael was dumbfounded. Many or those antiquated "novels" and "movies" were recorded, but most people preferred spending time in VR than reading an old book or watching an old, two-dimensional projection that wasn't interactable. "I remember them, but we really don't need them, do we? Our Spartans can adapt to anything. Spies are useless if the person they work for gets crushed like a fly."

John smirked. "Nothing is unstoppable, Michael, least of all our army. Everything has a weak point, from armor to weapons to tactics to formations to strategies. My job allows me to sniff out ways to protect these gaps. However, since we do have such sophisticated defenses and offenses, we've never had the need for someone who can hide amongst the enemy and sow dissidence and confusion." He took a breath. It was hard to sell something if it was deemed useless, and if he didn't drive this next point perfectly, it would all be for naught. "Look, no one knows what goes on in the Covenant and Heretic councils. Every informant we send only relays confused messages, with the occasional spark of intel, which is usually a bait set by them to ignite a war with the other. Obviously, our informants don't get the truth when we send them, with or without holograms. So I've been designing the next generation of Spartan, one which can mimic anything, as you saw by the holo-disguise, which, by the way, is not affected by your MEP wave, as well as break any encryption or hide anything which we would ordinarily not have access to without force. We'll have a spy system of the olden times, only with a much more sophisticated network."

"I was wondering why that hologram didn't die. Anyway, you want a super-spy, to replace the need for super-soldiers?" Michael was

hesitant to jump on this particular bandwagon, but it had its merits. If it succeeded, they could continue to subjugate the Covenant and Heretics indefinitely, ruling through persuasion and hints rather than brute force and propagandaâ€|

Michael got up. "Well, you'll have to submit the whole project to me. I can tell you right now that there will be many people opposed to it. As for me, I'm inclined to accept this idea, but you will have to sway me, too." Michael knew that John was using their friendship to sway the decision in his favor, but Michael could also tell that the program might be useful. It all depended on how John planned on accomplishing his goal.

"It'll be the first item you see this morning, Michael." John looked up to see the bus descending right over him. The bus was a simple shuttle, similar in design to the old space shuttles of the 21st century, except that it used gravitics to transport its passengers between places, in this case transporting Michael, John, and Sarah to the Citadel, where they began the drudgery of a 73 hour day before coming back to sleep for 20 hours. The marvels of technology allowed for this adjusted sleep schedule, but it was taxing on the body. Estimates placed the average human life span at almost twice as long if humans were allowed to maintain the average 24 hour days. However, many employers felt the 3:1 work time over the 1:1 work time of the original sleep schedule was much more beneficial for the empire as a whole.

As the bus ascended through the clouds, the outline of a giant planetoid, in the orbit the moon had been in, became apparent above their heads. It had a diamond shape, with multiple spires and rods extending in all directions. With multiple armaments and defenses spattered throughout the base, this stationary fortress, nicknamed the Citadel, was the heart of the IE. Every executive order was relayed through here. Generals on far off missions were required to check in via holographic link. Everything which was of importance, from the smallest orders to the biggest decisions, was made here. At the center of the Citadel, with the exception of the central Quantum Reactor, was the President's chamber, a large, spacious room with two circular desks in the middle, one extending from the ceiling down, the other extending from the floor up, taking advantage of the science of gravitics to effectively double the work space available to the President. The room itself was necessarily large in case a procession of Covenant or Heretic leaders decided to request an audience, as their entourage usually consisted of several dozen guards.

As Michael sat down at his gigantic desk, he ordered an electronic databoard (colloquially known as an EDB) containing the schedule of tasks requiring his attention for the day. The first one, as promised, was a full scale report, complete with visual diagrams and schematics, of the project John wanted to head. It looked promising, and its budget was surprisingly low considering the usual expenditures required to create a new Spartan programâ€|

Michael leaned back and began to read. It looked promising enoughâ€|

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>The Intergalactic Bipartite Committee was comprised of two houses,



one focusing on military and social aspects, dealing with military budgets and similar issues, as well as the well-being of the general populace on all the planets, while the other focused on economic and political issues, dealing in manipulating the money and budgets, as well as swaying people to keep them in power. Similar to the rest of the IE, this had a nickname as well, known as the Iron Brain Committee, or IBC. It was through the IBC that the whole empire was manipulated to continually vote for the same people and the same strategies over and over again. This gave the people the illusion in freedom, though their true freedom, of speech, guns, and protests, was squelched at all times. <p>Today, though, would prove far more interesting for the rulers of the IE. A bill had recently been placed before the council by President Michaels for a new type of Spartan, one which would fulfill a spy role for the army, essentially a clone of the ONI agents of lore. While the ordinary citizen might think of it as a good cause, giving better security, the IBC was split right down the center. There was a large majority who saw these Spartans as a disaster waiting to happen. Their most common argument was that, if a Spartan went rogue, as Spartans were known to do on occasion, they would have very little power to stop them at current security regulations. The other side argued that, while dangerous, the potential benefits far outweighed the dangers. In the end, when it came down to a vote, the only person who could sway anyone was the President.<p>

As Michael stepped up to the podium and began his speech, he reflected on his friend, John. John had always been striving to make the IE a better place, ever since he originally had been made into the advisor of the Special Projects Division. He had come up with several ideas, most of them good, but since he was only an advisor, they had all been shut down without so much as a glance. Michael was probably the carrier for John's plan, but he didn't care. That's what friends did, right?

Michael wrapped up his 45 minute long speech, eyeing as many people as he could see. The speech had to be just right, perfect and understanding at the same time. If it came across as pompous, he would lose the support of the powerful and influential people. If it came across as belittling, he'd lose the support of the people who thought that it was a big issue. If it was humorous, he'd lose the support of the serious people, and so on and so forth. It was hard to please everyone, but it was possible. After all, if it can be dreamt, it can be done.

As Michael finished, he realized he had done the impossible. The whole virtual auditorium, filled with well over two thousand holographic images, clapped and applauded, the sound rolling and swelling with each person. Though he had given it while sitting at his desk, attached to a VR projector, he had touched the thoughts of everyone who was at the IBC, be they in Moscow or in a deep-space monitoring station. He swelled with pride. This was exactly what John had been hoping for, and Michael hadn't let him down.

With that, Michael raised his hands, and the assembled fell silent. "Men and women of the Committee, I now ask you, will you throw your weight behind this new initiative? Would you make the next step towards our future? If you believe in me, your president, I request that you vote yes." As in the Congress of the United States of America of long ago, almost all movements required a two-thirds vote, though they didn't require people to second motions. The machine that

was the IE began to turn at this point.

Throughout the amassed blob of people, the vote trickled back. Sixty eight percent in favor, with 20 against and 12 undecided. It was a success. As Michael stepped down from the platform, one of the many people in the crowd came up to him. "You did it! I'm so happy! Thank you for all your help!" The man was practically crying. Michael smiled. "I only did what you asked me to, John. Your own words from your report did the rest." John smiled as well, in spite of his tears. This time, Michael had recognized him, even with the fake avatar. With a few more "Thank you"s, John disappeared into the crowd, heading back to his work place, celebrating and laughing the whole day long. Michael merely said hello and good-bye to a few more people before he finally left for the rest of the day that was ahead of him.

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>A little later on, Michael felt the jingle that signaled he had an incoming call. Pulling himself out of an <em>engrossing<em> budget assessment of Theos Prime, Michael turned on his VR.

"Michael here."

John's avatar appeared. "I wanted to thank you again. You've done so much for me, even though I'm undeserving of your gratitude. You are an amazing friend to me, and I really appreciate the fact that you pushed that through. I was holding my breath in the front row, waiting to hear the results. I still can't believe that you got it done."

Michael looked at John's avatar. "It was no problem. You remember the saying, when we were kids? 'Anything you put your mind toâ€¦'"

"'You can do.' Yep. I believe it was I who first quoted it. You were still wondering why the sun was yellow instead of blue."

Michael shrugged. Children were like that. "I still think the sun would look cooler if it was blue. Unfortunately, I've recently learned that a blue sun isn't cool at all, but a fireball of death. And I don't want to be known as the one who evaporated the oceans and killed off all the plants." This elicited a laugh from John, but Michael was already pushing forward with the more pressing matters. "By the way, you do realize that you're in trouble now, right?"

John's previously glowing face fell with a silent crash. A worried look replaced it, staring intently at Michael's face. "Why? What's happened?"

"You're head of your project, that's what," Michael said, his smile growing broader. John always did think of the worst case scenario, and it appeared that this time was no different. John's face reignited with happiness, although this time there was a glint in them that revealed to Michael that he had been hoping for the job. Michael chuckled a bit, but knew he had to get back to work.

"I'll see you around, John. Do me a favor, and don't get yourself killed. That project you're heading isn't going to be easy to handle, you know."

This time, John nodded solemnly, the happiness inside him visibly ebbing away. "No promises, but I expected this. Besides, I've already been stuck in this position, so no going back, right?"

Michael shook his head. "No. No going back."

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>AN: Well, that's the first chapter. (Sorry that I'm two days late!) I hope to make the next chapter quickly, but this is going to be a REALLY long story (over 10 pages of mapping alone, not including outlines and the rest) which will probably take me about a month for each chapter. Here's to hoping that I get better at writing as I go. Any criticism is welcome, including flames. If you've got an intelligible and intuitive comment, please feel free to send it to me, and I'll probably respond, too. Thanks!

And please, PLEASE tell me if I have grammatical errors, am expounding on points for too long, I misspelled a word, etc. I'm rereading these chapters, but I'm NOT perfect, and I could really use all the help I can get. Thanks again!

By the way, this is an Alternate Universe - Maintains similarities with points up until Halo 2, then diverges. Ignoring Halo 3 storyline for the most part. (Though I may include parts from Halo 3 later, if it fits with the general storyline)

Next update should be before October 15th. See you then

### 3. Chapter 1: Boot Camp

For once in his life, John felt like things were going his way. Michael had given him everything that he needed and more. There were three bases which had been assigned to John's command, each with a radically different task. As John returned to his office from the long day of working out the details of his pet project, he realized that he was excruciatingly exhausted. He sat back in his ergonomic chair and decided to take a small nap.

\* \* \*

>The new body was going to be created at the Dabos III base. The base had previously been constructed at the end of the UNSC, meant to create slates quickly to counter the threat of insurgency, but had been decommissioned when the number of Spartans began to outweigh the needs of the Empire. It was fitting, considering that it was one of the biological construction zones for the first Spartans. This new Spartan required a distinctly female body. This was due to certain recent discoveries in the human brain. Over the years, the mapping of the feminine brain showed strong advances in the areas of the brain relating to fine muscular control, information processing, and emotions over those of the male brain. As such, the female gender provided the ideal landscape material for the integration of the AI.  
<p>The AI was to be created at a base on Serendine, a lone, artificial planet created for black ops research and development. It orbited a barren, red sun, devoid of any planets or natural satellites, exactly what the perfect setting for a military installation looked like. Serendine was the prime place for the

development of this experimental battle armor, as the most pristine and powerful construction machines in the galaxy were housed in this tiny planetoid. (Nowhere near as powerful as those housed on the Ark, though. That had been deemed a "Black-out" area ever since the "Incident." What happened there, though, no one could say. It was rumored for a time that there were zombies there, but no one <em>really</em> believed that story.)

The third and final site for the project was Alpha. It was a derelict Halo, near the Galactic Center, which had been gutted by the army and then refitted to be an AI production center. Also noted as a "Black-out" area on an intergalactic map, the base provided the perfect place to complete the AI for the Spartan, and then integrate and train them in the use of their new body and armor, as this Halo, like the rest of them, came complete with artificial landscapes the likes of which rivaled any environment. Still, the estimated time to develop just the new AI was around a year of solid work. It wouldn't be easyâ€|

For now, though, the center of production was on Dabos. As the whole project was receiving limited funding, the project only had a few scientists working on it. Therefore, at the end of each section, the base they were working in was evacuated by the Spartan personnel, returned to the original owner, and the next stage's base was activated. The estimated time to complete the project was two years, but most of the scientists that had already been called in were optimistic that they could accelerate that time table to just over a year.

If this project worked, then John would probably one of the most celebrated people in the IE, and would be on his way to becoming the most notable celebrity of his timeâ€|

\* \* \*

>"Oi! Wake up, you lazy bastard!" <p>John awoke with a start, his dream of the project disappearing as quickly as the smoke from the cigar that was inches from his nose.<p>

"I came to give you congratulations on getting your project approved and find you asleep at your desk. That sweet smell of success get to your head, Jones? Or are you just not getting enough sleep, what with all those crazy ideas running through that thick skull o' yours?"

The man addressing John was none other than his boss, Jerry Ray. He was a burly man, whose muscles showed that he worked out regularly.. His brown eyes and curly black hair cut short was mirrored perfectly with his dark brown skin color, reflecting his African origins. Despite looking like a football star, though, this man was the chief of the entire Special Projects Division. If the board was Congress, then J-Ray was the President. He held in his pinky enough power to order two planets to do whatever he wished, and had enough contacts that he could always get his way. However, he was a kind soul, who had worked hard to get where he was, and never stepped on the little man for the benefit of the big one. As a result, John and J-Ray had become great friends over the years.

"I'm getting plenty of sleep, sir. Just figured I could use a little rest after a harrowing day," John said, smiling the whole time. Jones

was a nickname of sorts, as J-Ray had never been able to remember John's name when the time was necessary. Eventually, Jones had become his nickname with the whole board. "Anyway, sir, it's an honor that you came down personally to give your thanks. I didn't expect for it to pass so quickly."

"That's what happens when your buddy is the emperor of a freaking galaxy. You end up getting your way a lot of the time." J-Ray snickered. Michael was the one guy everyone wanted to be friends with, but John was the only one that actually had a friendship with him, besides the secretary. And the secretary was one cold lady if you ever got the chance to meet her. She had a strict "All business, no socializing," demeanor, but was only friendly towards Michaelâ€|

John's face quickly resumed his normal work demeanor. "Well, I do have work to finish today besides celebrating a victory against the legislative system and taking a nap, so I'll get back to itâ€| I'm glad you stopped by to say congratulations. It means a lot to me." John picked up one of his three EDBs.

J-Ray smiled again. "You're a hard worker, and you did a good job getting the system up top to accept you. Keep a cool head and you'll do fine. I'll see you around, you lucky bastard." With that, J-Ray turned around and walked out, pride showing on his face. It was starting to look like he had another friend in a high place nowâ€|

\* \* \*

>Zachariah Heber was sitting on his bed at the same time that John was getting congratulated by J-Ray. Zach, though, wasn't happy so much as very, VERY sour. He was currently glaring menacingly at a small, square, metal plate, with a blue-rimmed, black-core sphere imbedded in the middle of the two-dimensional object. It resembled a soccer ball sticking out of an elevated section of the floor, the way it sat on the carpet, and was surrounded on all sides by a very messy room, which resembled his room two weeks ago, when the internal environment went haywire and generated a tornado in his room. <p>"YOU STUPID THING!! WORK!" Zach yelled as he leaped from his bed onto the machine, attempting to shove a pair of socks he had randomly grabbed into the sphere. The device was a slipspace suitcase, more commonly called SS. So far, everything he had tried to push into the slipspace aperture, which was supposed to be able to absorb anything of a small size (up to a grand piano) into a tiny (house-sized) room, had failed. Even his watch failed to pass through the barrier.<p>

He pushed and pulled on the machine, yelling the whole time. "WHY WON'T YOU- Oh, what's this?" he said, as he found a button, conveniently located by the handle.

The shield around the aperture fizzled and died, allowing the domed hole to suck up him and his socks. Zach sighed. Why was it that he could never seem to do anything right? He clapped twice to turn on the overhead light in the dimensional bubble. No matter how "user-friendly" the technology, he always seemed to fail at even its most basic use. The most ironic fact was that his field was cutting edge neuro-mechanical interfaces between humans and AI, possibly the most complex and dangerous field in the galaxy, both for the humans and the people working on themâ€|

Zach got up and walked out of the bubble. The tingly sensation of passing through the multi-dimensional field quickly faded, and he began hurling his clothes and projects into the bubble. The mess diminished as the light blue bubble continued to absorb the plethora of materials, useful and not, into itself.

Once the room was cleared, Zach sat back down on his bed. He had finally had his dream realized. He was now a part of the design team working on the next generation of Spartans. The current ones were pretty much maxed out, each Spartan with more equipment, vehicles, and weapons than an entire battalion of soldiers in the old days. Just one soldier was said to be able to clear a building filled with terrorists without breaking open a millionth of their weapons.

He saw a Spartan for the first time when he was 2. His great grandmother was showing him an action figure that the UNSC had produced, showing the long-presumed dead Master Chief. He was hailed as the savior of humanity, a veritable knight in olive-green armor, the best Spartan ever. Since that first little action figure, he had worked hard to get into one of the Spartan development programs. It had been his dreamâ€¦

Now that he had his dream, though, he couldn't shake this foreboding feeling, as if everything around him was surreal, and he would wake up at any moment. He chided himself, convinced that it was just the jitters at finally getting the job. Besides, shouldn't he be more interested in WHY he had been chosen? His field wasn't often utilized by the high-mechanical Spartans, as the spinal interface, the most common method by which Spartans manipulated the human bodies they were given, was easy enough to create. Neuro-mechanical structures built to interface with the human brain were far more complex, though, and required a far more delicate touch. So why did they need him?

He picked up his bag absentmindedly, and then let out a loud curse as a small explosion of clothes and other paraphernalia flew out into his previously immaculate room. That damn button againâ€¦

\* \* \*

>If the IE can be credited with anything, it would be always going the extra distance. The IE regulated trade, businesses, products, buildings, even transportation. All military, economic, and political instruments were controlled by this vast conglomeration of businessmen and politicians. As a result, product quality rules were STRONGLY enforced. Every building built had to suffer orbital plasma bombardment, simulated earthquakes, simulated volcanic flows, and other highly destructive tests until they were considered safe for human use. The same rules applied to all other physical items built by the government, from computers to AI to chairs to tables to beds and beyond (though not necessarily subject to the same tests). <p>As a result of the meticulous construction required to pass the tests, the quality of life was actually pretty high throughout the IE. This was mimicked in all military structures as well. The Dabos III facility was the best factory for blanks ever built, even 500 years later. It was the first IE building ever, and the IE was proud of that. There were tours through there on occasion, but those were stopped for the period the project would be there, under the guise of "repairing" systems.<p>

Zach stepped out of the quantum teleporter and immediately stumbled into a silver clad Spartan XII unit. The unit wore a cloth-like material that seemed to flow and fade at the edges, almost transparent. Zach's eyes seemed to slide off of the unit to the building around him. However, the two black ovals sitting over the eyes of the silver head belied the silver statue look. (It was rumored that the eye shields were taken from the E.O.D. variant of the original MJOLNIR armor, but this is unconfirmed.) Zach didn't have time to be surprised by this soldier, though.

"I have a job to do. Are you my escort?" Zach stated quickly. The unit nodded its head, and then motioned for him to follow. As quickly as the unit left its post, another quickly took its place. It was only then that Zach got a good look at his surroundings. The normally busy reception area of the teleporter was quiet, with a Spartan XII standing in front of each of the twenty seven teleportation areas. Aside from him and the Spartans, though, the building appeared deserted, as if the planet had been evacuated. However, Zach didn't have much more time to sit and stare. The Spartan ducked through the exit and moved into the field just outside the door.

About 30 feet away, over the grassy plain which stretched before him, a bubble appeared. The bubble, similar in color to the SS, grew in size until it was roughly as wide as a Scorpion, then collapsed upon itself to reveal the Hornet Mk. X, a fast attack unit designed around the latest in gravitic pulse engines, able to fly at Mach 20 in Earth atmosphere. It was a non-standard two-seater design, apparently used for transporting the Spartan and its passenger into battle and out of it quickly. The fighter craft had a central pod with two triangular wings extending forward beyond the body by about twelve feet, instead of swinging out, and each wing was armed with a particle cannon attached to the tips. While the maneuverability wasn't the greatest, the craft could get in and out of range fast enough to deliver a three-shot burst, or a sustained beam, enough to slice through the toughest transport or fighter craft shields with ease and still carve the craft up like a Thanksgiving turkey. All before the pilot even knew that an enemy was in range. The Hornet Mk. X found a name in history during the Covenant rebellion, when the last of the San 'Shyuum incited another war between the young IE and the Covenant. The casualties on the Covenant side were so high that the San 'Shyuum actually began attempts to negotiate a cease fire. Unfortunately, the San 'Shyuum home world was destroyed in a sneak attack by IE forces before the cease fire had even finished leaving the superluminal arrays. No San 'Shyuum had crawled from their blackened hole since that glorious day.

Zach climbed into the sleek and deadly craft. While he was impressed with the design, he wondered what the necessity for speed was. As fast as the Hornet was, he could circle this tiny planet within two minutes. Why did he need to get to the building so fast?

The Spartan leaped gracefully into the cockpit, sliding into his seat like water. The machine, without so much as a hum, lifted off of the ground, slowly and with care. Then there was a loud explosion.

\* \* \*

>John was busy marking off the large list of supplies that he would need when he heard the approaching sonic boom. His final technician was finally arriving. The Hornet screamed in from the horizon and

decelerated from Mach 15 to sub-Mach 1 within the space of three seconds, and then coasted into the landing bay with the grace of a hummingbird. The docking clamps reacted immediately, rising from the floor to form two support struts, arms and pipes snaking from the walls to refuel and rearm the vehicle for battle, and a staircase rising from the ground to let the pilot out. Of course, the military precautions weren't necessary here, but the IE liked to be prepared for every contingencyâ€¦

Mark clambered unsteadily out of the cockpit, shaken by his brief look down at the planet below him. His speed had shocked him, stunting his breathe and leaving him gasping. The disorientation of viewing such extreme speed with nearly no sense of acceleration had left him witless, and he was babbling incoherently by the time he got to the floor, where he collapsed on it and began to kiss its surface vehemently.

John couldn't help but laugh. "First time in a Hornet, eh kid?" This genius among geniuses had been shaken by something that John had experienced every day for the past several years. John's personal Hornet, bought at a great expense, was richly designed, though devoid of the weapons systems that most IE Hornets contained. He flew it everywhere, and had insisted that every one of his team get a flight in one.

"Yeahâ€¦ ughâ€¦ I never want to do that again, though." Zach moaned as his body continued to assault his senses, disorienting him despite his knowledge that nothing had changed, not in pressure or air quality or any one of so many other environmental factors that his body was denying.

"Don't worry. We're going to be doing this on a daily basis from now on, to get you used to flight and fighting. I don't want weaklings under my command, understood?" John stated in a matter of fact voice.

Zach just stared at this man in front of him. Was he serious? This wasn't a marine unit, it was a science team. Why was the boss worried about physical fitness? He didn't have time to ponder any more, though, as his body reminded him that it wasn't feeling so well.

"Fine, fine. I'll do whatever you want," Zach groaned, getting up on his shaky legs. He staggered forward, brushing past John.

"Don't you want to know where your room is, Zachariah?" John inquired, smirking at Zach's weakness.

Zach stopped. Of course he did. He wanted to catch some now deeply needed R&R. "Yeah. I do. And call me Zach. Zachariah is too formal if we are going to be working together for the next two years."

John smiled again. This kid was a softie, but he had a good heart, from what John had heard. Things might work out between the two of them. He might even be included in the plan. That was a distance away, though, and there was plenty of time to evaluate the kid's skills later.

"It's room 212, the faculty room. Plenty of bedrooms, so go ahead and pick one. Mine's the president's room, though, so no stealing it. Got it?"



Zach nodded and trudged down the corridor. That ride had been surprisingly anxious, but since it had been three days since he last slept, the weight of the world had seemed to settle on his shoulders. He went to a gravity chair (a chair with a propulsion unit, a place to put your luggage, and a seat belt), sat down, put his bag in the compartment behind it, and sat down. "212," he murmured, and the chair flew off, moving through the corridors at 90 miles per hour. Zach groaned.

\* \* \*

>"Hey, we got the last recruit!" Three of the scientists cheered as Zach's chair floated down to meet them in the room. They were happy to receive him, limping off of the chair and gazing blankly at his surroundings. The sense of vertigo had left him, though he still felt wobbly. The men looked up expectantly. <p>"What's up?" he croaked out. The scientists stared at him for a second, and then started laughing.<p>

"The guy has never ridden in a Hornet before! Unbelievable! Look at him! He looks wiped!" The men continued cajoling as he grabbed his stuff from the back of the lift. Another man came up to him.

"Sorry for their rudeness. They are brilliant and kind, so don't take their attitudes the wrong way. You know, the new assignment and all. Anyway, my name is Chad. Nice to meet 'cha." Chad smiled as his huge hand engulfed Zach's weak return. Chad was enormous, standing a full 6'8", with dark brown skin. He was definitely of African origin, but he had the rustic looks of a German.

"Nice to meet you, too. Do you know what room mine is?" Zach smiled at Chad with all his strength. He just wanted to go to bed right nowâ€|

"Sure thing. Follow me. And don't worry about your suitcase. I got it." Chad lightly pried the rather hefty SS from Zach's hand and loped off. Zach lagged behind him.

At the end of the hallway, next to the President's room, Chad opened the door on the right. "This is your room. It's got a full holographic projection system, fridge, a bathroom, and everything else you'll ever need. Everything's all keyed in, too. You can open your door with this thumb scanner."

Zach blindly held his thumb over the holographic display, and the door opened with a small\_hiss\_. Chad sauntered in, dropped off the bags, and then sauntered back out, briefly looking back. "Get some sleep man. You look dead." Zach nodded absently, wandered to the bed, landed on it with a thump, and drifted into dream land.

\* \* \*

>Zach awoke to the sounds of explosions. He leaped out from under the covers and charged into the hallway. At the end of the corridor, he saw two unidirectional heavy shield generators set up. John and Chad were crouched behind them, shooting at an unseen threat in the main common room. The wall nearest to Chad exploded, knocking him over. Chad struggled to get back up. He had been injured, with a piece of shrapnel sticking out of his back, around the kidney area. John's eyes traveled from Chad's damaged body to Zach. Zach couldn't move.

It was like all those war-simulations that he had seen. There was blood everywhere. 'I just arrived no more than a couple hours ago! How could this be happening?!? Why me?!?' he screamed in his head. <p>"ZACH! Get your ass over here!" yelled John with vehemence, motioning with his hands. Zach nodded, but didn't move. It took another explosion in his room, annihilating all of his personal effects, to shock him out of it. Zach sprinted to the shield generators. As he arrived, John yanked the gun out of Chad's hands. Chad had stopped moving a couple seconds ago, and was now just staring at the floor with forlorn eyes, as if he had been wishing for something. "Here! This is a gun! Point, Shoot, Shoot, Shoot! Don't stop shooting for anything! Got it?!?" John screamed over the sound of the facility falling apart around them. Zach nodded. He had no idea who the enemy even wasâ€|<p>

The shield directly behind John went down. As John turned, Zach saw an Elite jump over the remains of the device. With a battle cry, the Elite stabbed his antiquated plasma sword through John's chest. With his last ounce of strength, John whispered one word to Zach. "Surviveâ€|"

\* \* \*

>Zach awoke with a start. He was still lying on top of his sheets. Of course, he wouldn't have thrown off the covers if that had been real. He never got into bedâ€| So that was a dream then. <p>"What the hell was that?" Zach said out loud. It had been roughly three years since his last dream, so he was particularly confused as to why this had come up now. It wasn't as if he hadn't changed locations before, and he had met nice people, too. So what was up with this weird dream?<p>

Zach quickly got undressed, showered and then redressed. Breakfast was being served in the common room, so he marched out of his room and down to the common room. Seeing the assortment of scientists maneuvering through the small crowd before him, he figured he was in the right place. He saw an open kiosk, and sprinted to it. The hustle and bustle of the other scientists obscured his hasty attitude. He grabbed the kiosk and ordered a large skillet, with two eggs, potatoes, and several green vegetables. He added a parfait to the order, and then smiled as his order appeared in the container before him. He grabbed it and moved to a table. Chad meandered over to him and sat down.

"Yo! How was your night? We had a great party going over here, but we all hit the sack a little after you did. You sure were tired to sleep this late, weren't you?"

Zach smiled broadly at Chad. "Yeah. I was exhausted. The whole flight, plus that gravy chair? What was up with that? The thing felt like it was running more than twice as fast as it should have been."

"Yeah, John supped it up. The thing's minimum speed is 60 miles per hour now. Half the scientists here think that it's too extreme, and the other half think that it's too little. Some have planned to add a couple Quantum energy plants to the thing. The final result? They plan to reach Mach 7 with that damn thing. I won't touch it anymore," Chad said with a slight twinkle in his eye. It sounded like he was one of the one's who wanted to add those energy plantsâ€|

"Well, enough about ridiculous speeds that no human should ever reach, despite the gravity generators that are supposed to keep him from feeling the G's. What's the news on the project?" Zach said.

Chad was going to respond, but the lights dimmed before then. The scientists still bustling around sat down in the nearest available chair, and John stood up. Moving briskly to the front of the room, he pressed three buttons on his EDB. "Welcome, gentlemen! You know why you have been called, so I'll skip the pleasantries. We are building a super-Spartan. We begin work in just over two hours. In the meantime, we are going to go through boot camp. Got it?"

The scientists stared dumbfounded, but the look on John's face was deadly serious. "You have thirty minutes to finish your meal. While this isn't a military unit, we are building a military project. Everyone here will be in top physical fitness by the end of this project, get it?"

Everyone started smiling. Most people had read this little part of their contract, but it appeared that Zach had, in his haste to work on the project, forgotten to read this clause. "What's going on?" he murmured to Chad. "Boot camp. It was in the agreement. Didn't you read it?" Chad replied with a grin.

"Umâ€¦ I must have skipped that part," Zach murmured.

"Well, here's the cheap, penny-for-your-thoughts version. We start out with military maneuvers, flying Hornets for a good little while. We each got our own for this project, so it'll be fun to try them out. Then we go through a boot camp-style training program. We'll be doing anaerobic exercise, such as sprinting, push-ups, squats, etc., and then do some aerobic exercise. That will include running and some other stuff. It'll take us about 12 hours to finish the whole thing. Then, we'll spend the rest of the time working on the project."

"Now, is everyone done their food? Good, now get to the bay!" John shouted, drowning out all the groans and sighs from the scientists. Zach stared at the empty plates lying in front of him. He had evidently eaten it all, though he didn't remember eating it. Oh well. Time to get to workâ€¦

\* \* \*

>AN: OK, first off, I'm three months late. I promised October, and now it's January. I'm so sorry for those of you who were hoping that I'd update sooner. It's taken a ton of time to write these things, and with college essays, extended essays, and theory of knowledge essays, I've had NO time to write anything for myself. My days have been shot. No excuses, though. I failed you all. I'm still going to do the story, but hopefully (Now that I'm done with the essays) I'll be updating more frequently. Anyway, if you notice a mistake or have a question, please include them in your review. I changed the previous chapter because I got a nice review on the fact that blue suns aren't cold, but hotter than anything else. So I changed that, and am trying to get my facts as straight as possible.

Any help is appreciated. Thank you! And until next time, when I try

to do this all over again in a much shorter time.

End  
file.